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# Free thinker

Founded by G W Foote in 1881

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*'Be nice  
and keep  
courage'*

*— Anne Frank*

Nicolas Walter re-reads the Diaries

**'Cold dagger of atheism' strikes at  
Cambridge: Keith Porteous Wood  
centre pages**

**Death of Freethought stalwart  
G N Deodhekar — Page 3**

# Up Front

## God-botherers' operation beats the NHS cuts

AT A time when we are hearing of severe shortages of nurses and hospital facilities within the National Health Service, it is amazing to discover that the hospital chaplaincy service is growing rapidly.

A recent issue of the weekly *Health Service Journal* quoted the Rev Robert Clarke, Chief Executive of the Hospital Chaplaincies Council, to the effect that NHS chaplains are "better represented and

funded now than at any point in the past 25 years".

And in the Southampton University Hospitals Trust, where there was until recently only one full-time chaplain, there are now five – and they are seeking to recruit a sixth: "The budget has doubled from £60,000 to £120,000, and is still rising", according to Patient Services Manager Cheryl Cooté.

The claim is that these extra chaplains provide "spiritual, ethical and pastoral support" to patients. One hospital chaplain I spoke to said he never wears a "round collar" except to chapel services – he admits to camouflage!

I have even heard that students at Stirling University have to consult the chaplain when they have problems, since the professional, and secular, counselling service has been cut owing to lack of cash.

Now I am not against counselling, but why do hospitals see the need for chaplains, instead of professional secular counsellors, for what is deemed as "spiritual" – in other words, emotional and psychological needs? Even the *Health Service Journal* cited above quotes one chaplain as saying that there is no "hard-sell religion" about their job. So why employ people who are identified as "religious"? Even NHS staff, according to a survey, welcome these chaplains. One patient, although admitting to be an atheist, possibly feeling vulnerable in a hospital bed, is quoted: "I believe the chaplaincy service is vital to non-believers and believers alike".

A lot of the problem about chaplains in hospital appears to centre around the use of the word "spiritual". Of course, it all depends upon the definition employed, and the meaning the user intends. If by "spiritual" we mean "emotional" "psychological" or "aesthetic", then why not say so? Otherwise, it seems as though these chaplains are getting in by the back door: they must surely see themselves as representatives of their belief? Surely they don't deliberately prey upon patients and their relatives when pain, bereavement or distress make them vulnerable?

The British Humanist Association has proposed an alternative "Humanists in Hospitals" scheme, under which Humanists would be funded, trained and "let loose on patients on the same footing as the clergy". National Lottery funding was sought, so far without success.

I was further surprised by an article which appeared in the *Nursing Times* a little while ago. The Professor of the Philosophy of Education, at the University of London, John White, described his experiences as a patient in a coronary care unit. He was quite satisfied with his medical care, but very upset that as part of a captive audience he was unable to escape a religious service in his ward.

He had collapsed on a Saturday and was "wired up" to machines on the Sunday morning when a group arrived from the local evangelical free church. Hymns,

prayers and a sermon on the moral crisis facing Britain followed.

John White described himself as a life-long agnostic, who was sure that this religious outburst did his physical health no good. He wondered how widespread the practice was. He asked if there were ever any objections, and found himself expressing his disgust fairly audibly: "Who gives you the bloody right?" Another patient suggested it would be better if the service could be held away from the ward and broadcast over the hospital radio for those who wished to listen but were unable to leave the ward.

Professor White thought he was being taken advantage of, and that this imposed service conflicted with the unit's "philosophy": the health team apparently had a concern for the autonomy of patients!

As self-determining people, patients should have the right to refuse being present at such statements of personal belief. He pondered: "If the local Humanist Association had wanted to talk to the patients in our ward, would the Sister have allowed it?"

What Professor White questioned is at the heart of permitting NHS-paid hospital chaplains access to those with so-called spiritual needs in hospital wards. Hospital chaplains are paid up to £22,000 a year – about as much as the top rate for a nurse who still does actual clinical work with patients. Most nurses are paid a lot less.

At a time when both official and anecdotal evidence points to a lack of nursing staff, and to stress from overwork for those on duty, it is galling to learn of the expansion of the chaplaincy service in hospitals. The nurses' pay award for this year is to be "phased", by paying it in two parts. What will chaplains get?

While the demand for help with grief at time of bereavement, in the form of Humanist or non-religious funerals, is growing at a great rate, it is not only surprising but also smacks of underhandedness, to observe an increase in the number of hospital chaplains. At the same time, there is a "freeze" on the employment of some grades of secular staff. If there were more counsellors available, without a vested interest, then the need for these chaplains would wither.

Furthermore, chaplains for non-Christian faiths are also appointed more frequently in areas where this is deemed appropriate. But, as Professor White argues, "no-one would balk at priests and ministers coming into hospitals to give comfort to patients who wished it". But, allowing the NHS to provide this service, with taxpayers' money, and denying the Humanist alternative, is, according to Professor White an affront which "crosses that crucial line which protects the individual from encroachments on his or her liberty".

*The Freethinker* could not agree more.

Denis Cobell

The

## Freethinker

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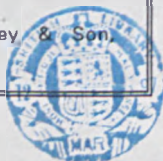
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**MEMORIAL MEETING for G N Deodhekar**

**WM McILROY**, former Editor of *The Freethinker* and one-time Secretary of the National Secular Society, will preside at a memorial meeting for G N Deodhekar in the Library of Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1, at noon on Saturday, March 15. Speakers will include:

**DANIEL O'HARA**, President of the National Secular Society.

**JIM HERRICK**, Vice-President of the NSS and Editor of *New Humanist* and *International Humanist News*.

**DAVID WILLIAMS**, former NSS Treasurer and former Managing Director of G W Foote & Company Limited and the Secular Society Limited.

# FREETHOUGHT STALWART ON TWO CONTINENTS

A tribute to G N Deodhekar  
by William McIlroy

had consolidated the Society's and *The Freethinker's* financial base. When Bill Griffiths retired, Dev was a worthy successor.

Dev was elected Treasurer of the NSS in 1968 and held office until 1992. He also served as Managing Director of the Secular Society Limited and G W Foote & Company Limited.

In addition to conducting business and accountancy matters for the NSS and its associated companies, he served on various committees and spoke at public meetings. On retiring to the South coast, he joined Brighton and Hove Humanist Group.

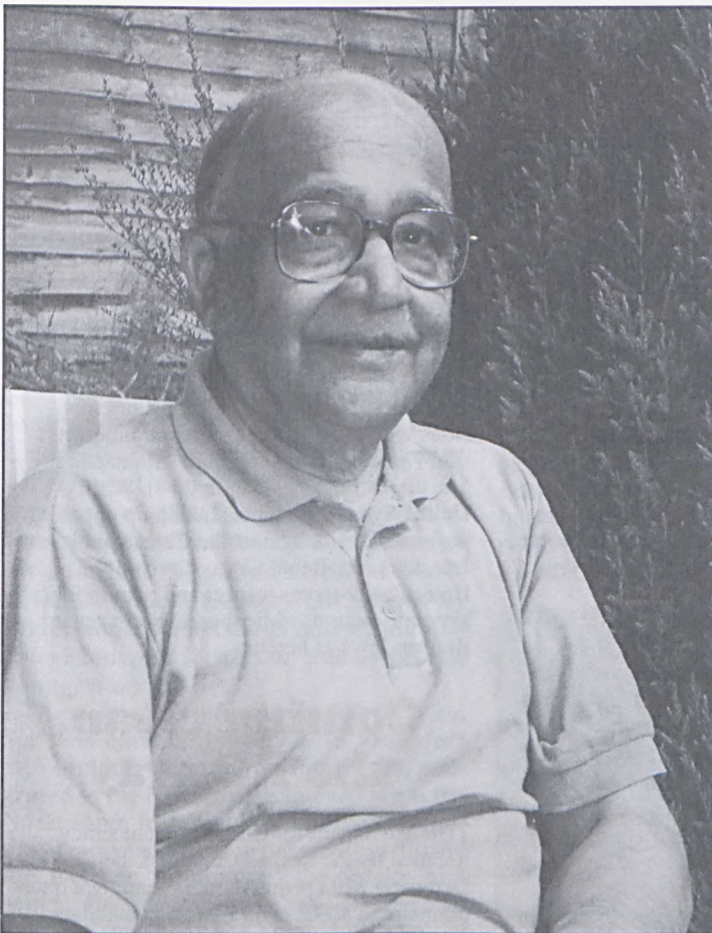
## Fundamentalism

It is a pity that Dev did not find time to write more. He did contribute a number of perspicacious articles to this journal, in his own name and under a pen-name, "An Indian Rationalist". His first, "Nehru: an Assessment" (June 12, 1964), was widely praised. In recent times his written work has concentrated on the danger posed by Islamic fundamentalism in India and in the United Kingdom.

As a young man, Dev was politically active in India's struggle for independence. Throughout his life he maintained links with the country's Freethought movement, being particularly supportive of the Indian Secular Society.

Dev was a very intelligent and perceptive individual. Totally unpretentious, he left the posturing and ego-tripping to lesser types, effectively devoting his ability and energy to the movement. He will be remembered with admiration and deep affection.

He was cremated at a non-religious ceremony in Bombay.



● G N Deodhekar, pictured "off duty" on a summer visit to the Yorkshire home of the Editor of *The Freethinker*. Photograph: Pam Brearey.

**S**INCE his retirement from teaching, Govind Narayan Deodhekar – always "Dev" to friends and colleagues – spent part of the winter in India, where he was born on March 16, 1919. His return to Britain, where he had lived for the past 40 years, was due this month. So it was a cause of much sorrow when news reached London that he had died, following a heart attack, in Muscat Oman.

Freethought organisations have traditionally depended on members who work in a voluntary capacity. Much of this is done behind-the-scenes by supporters who, for the most part, are unknown beyond their immediate circle. Inevitably, some fall by the wayside or take up other interests.

However, there is always a hard core of stalwarts who soldier on. Dev was one such – in the South Place Ethical Society, the Rationalist Press Association and, above all, in the National Secular Society, G W Foote & Company Limited (publishers of *The Freethinker*) and the Secular Society Limited.

What follows is a brief and quite inadequate account of Dev's outstanding (though not always fully appreciated) service on behalf of the Freethought movement.

Dev became involved with the NSS back in the early 1960s, when he joined the Marble Arch, London, branch of the Society. For many years he was to play a key role in NSS affairs, ever with unfailing dedication and integrity.

In due course, he was elected to the Executive Committee, forerunner of the present Council of Management. There he became acquainted with Bill Griffiths, whose business acumen and treasurership



# Down to Earth

with Colin McCall

## Catching 'em young

JUST before Christmas, Richard Dawkins drew attention to the absurd practice of giving little children a religious appellation. Referring to a four-year-old as a Muslim, a Sikh or a Christian implies that a young child can have "developed theological opinions", he said (*The Independent*, December 19, 1996).

While it would be laughable to "speak of a four-year-old monetarist Eurosceptic, a four-year-old dialectical materialist or a four-year-old neo-Kantian ... we accept 'Muslim child' or 'Christian child' without thinking".

"If a child is the child of an atheist", he continued, "does that make her an atheist child? Of course not, the very idea groans with sinister implications of indoctrination. For this reason, most educated atheists (and by the way, have you ever met an *uneducated* atheist?) bend over backwards to let their children join in the religious life of their schools". And he pointed out that the children who *are* withdrawn from religious classes and assemblies have parents belonging to rival religions.

Just after Christmas, Anne Atkins, the vicar's wife who spoke out so vehemently on Radio 4's "Thought for the Day" against the Church's acceptance of homosexual relationships, contributed her "Thought for the Year" to the *Daily Telegraph* (December 28, 1996). In this full-page article, embellished by a colour picture of the Atkins family, she attacked "intellectual sogginess brought about by excessive political correctness", that popular umbrella term used by reactionaries to cover anything they dislike. "Because we are so frightened of hurting feelings, we rarely admit that anyone might be wrong", she said.

What is relevant here, however, is the story she told of a "charmingly-spoken, well-educated mother", who didn't want to come to church herself, but wanted to drop her children off at Sunday school "to give them a chance to believe". Neither the mother nor her husband was a believer, but they wanted their children "to have the choice".

"What on earth for?" asked the incredulous Anne Atkins. "Either Christianity is a load of tosh ... Or it is true ..." Yes, Mrs Atkins, but atheists want their children to think for themselves.

## Father, dear Father ...

THE Roman Catholic Church's concern for the "unborn child" has not previously been matched by care for the children born of priestly fathers. But the Bishop of Plymouth, the Rt Rev Christopher Budd, has now set up a

team to investigate the needs of women who have had affairs with priests and been forced to bring up their children alone (*The Guardian*, January 11).

The news was welcomed by Adrianna Alsworth, who founded a support group, Sunflowers, for such women. In the past, she said, "it is the women who have been downgraded and publicly humiliated and the priests that people gave sympathy to. That is very wrong".

And she speaks with experience. She has had two daughters by Dermot O'Gorman, a priest of the Sacred Heart Community, who was comforting her after the death of her husband in a car crash. They had a five-year affair, but Father O'Gorman left her when news of the relationship broke and, according to a Sacred Heart Community spokesman, "isn't now a priest in any of our churches - we have strict celibacy rules" (*News of the World*, November 10, 1996).

No wonder, then, that Ms Alsworth thought the Bishop's statement "a very good thing". It also indicated a new realisation by the Church that, in the words of Bishop Budd, "if a priest has fathered a child by a woman, in some ways he is responsible".

## Faith of the Führer

IN HER critical biography, *Albert Speer* (Picador £9.99), Gitta Sereny prints a letter Speer wrote to his daughter, Hilde, from Spandau prison on January 9, 1953, in which he makes it clear that Hitler "forbade his chosen circle, Hess, Goebbels, Göring etc to leave their churches". And Hitler himself "never formally renounced the Catholic Church".

Speer doesn't believe that this was political expediency; he suspects that "in the way of many Catholics, he [Hitler] somehow couldn't give it up. I think they always believe that renouncing the Church would bring God's wrath upon them" (pp 631-2).

It only remains to add that the Roman Catholic Church never felt it necessary to bring "God's wrath" down on Hitler by excommunicating him.

## Disunited Synagogue

WHEN is a Jew not a Jew? When he goes to Reform synagogue seems to be the extreme Orthodox answer. An editorial in the "right wing" *Jewish Tribune* in January urged the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, not to address a memorial on February 20 to the Reform rabbi Hugo Gryn, who died last August. The paper held Gryn "responsible for influencing people away from the Torah" and

warned that if Sacks did attend, it would be the "disaster of the year" for the United Synagogue, of which he is the head.

The row exposes the "bitter historic divisions within the Anglo-Jewish community", said *The Guardian's* religious affairs editor, Madeleine Bunting, (January 18), "with United Synagogue rabbis taking up opposing positions" for or against the Chief Rabbi. Any Jew who, like Rabbi Gryn, survived the Holocaust deserves respect and admiration, says one faction, while those against regard Reform Jews as heretics.

## Coming clean, the RC way

THE Movement for Christian Democracy, founded by the Roman Catholic Liberal Democrat MP David Alton, is sending a questionnaire to all General Election candidates asking their views on abortion and euthanasia, and will publish the results in its newspaper, funded by Harrods-owner Mohammed al-Fayed. Candidates who refuse to respond will be confronted by MCD members at local meetings.

"The campaign is the latest sign that moral issues will take centre stage in the election", wrote Martin Wroe, religious affairs correspondent of *The Observer* (January 19); and Ken Livingstone (who admitted he wouldn't score highly on the questionnaire) thought that the principle of politicians coming clean on moral issues was a fair one.

True; but, as I said last month, we must not allow the Roman Catholic Church to set the agenda. There are many more moral issues than abortion and euthanasia, and General Election candidates must not be afraid to say so.

## Matrimonial mixtures

"IT HAS been estimated that some 67 per cent of all Catholics marry out of their faith, as do 44 per cent of Jews", while the Church of England has issued special guidelines for the increasing number of mixed marriages, wrote Dr Jonathan Romain, rabbi of the Maidenhead Synagogue, in *The Guardian's* "Faith to Faith" column on January 25. Muslim, Sikh and Hindu leaders are also alarmed at the increase in mixed marriages.

Dr Romain sees it as "a religious dilemma" for ministers of all faiths, and suggests that they must "find ways of accommodating mixed faith households within their communities".

But what are the chances for even his own faith, in the light of the bitter historic divisions evidenced above?

Nicolas Walter re-reads the *Diary of Anne Frank*

# 'Be nice and keep courage'

**T**HE *Diary of Anne Frank*, which was first published half a century ago, has appeared in more than 50 languages and sold more than 25 million copies around the world. It is claimed to be the most widely read non-fiction book after the Bible, and since the Bible is largely fiction this means the most widely read non-fiction book of all. It was one of the few autobiographical works included in the recent survey of the so-called "Hundred Greatest Books of the Twentieth Century" organised by Waterstone's Bookshops and Channel 4 Television, and its author was by far the youngest on the list.

The story of her life and death is familiar. She was born in June 1929 in Frankfurt into a middle-class Jewish family who emigrated to the Netherlands in 1933 when the Nazis came to power in Germany. Under the pressure of growing persecution during the German occupation, the family and some friends went into hiding in Amsterdam in 1942. Their hiding-place was betrayed in 1944, they were arrested and deported, and all except her father disappeared in the Holocaust. She survived Auschwitz but died of typhus in the Bergen-Belsen camp a few weeks before its liberation in May 1945.

Anne Frank would have been forgotten, like millions of other victims, but for her writing. She was given a diary for her thirteenth birthday, and she kept it and its successors for a little over two years. During the last few months she wrote a revised version in parallel with the original, following a radio appeal for such documents to be preserved for publication after the war. She also wrote stories and essays. Most of her manuscripts survived and were returned to her father in 1945. The first Dutch edition of the *Diary* appeared in 1947, and a series of editions and translations have appeared ever since, the latest English version only last month.

There may seem little to say after half a century, but three points are worth making.

The first point is that the *Diary* has never been published in full. Otto Frank produced an abridged and conflated version of the two manuscripts, and this is the basis of the early editions – published in English as *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1952) – and also of all the plays and films and radio and television treatments. After his death in 1980, the Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation sponsored a so-called "critical" edition in 1986, containing all the versions, and then a so-called "definitive" edition in 1991, containing a much longer conflated version. The English-language edition of the former was published as *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Critical Edition* (1989), and the English-language edition of the latter as *The Diary of a Young Girl: The*

*Definitive Edition* (1995). Neither edition is actually complete, and neither translation is satisfactory, but it is at least possible to read more of what she wrote than before.

The second point is that the image of Anne Frank has never changed. The *Diary* had a tremendous impact when it first appeared. It had an obvious appeal to Jewish people and a special attraction for young people, but it was and is read far beyond such categories. Even after all the material subsequently published about the Second World War and the Holocaust, and

sexual, lavatorial) reinforces first impressions without involving any significant alteration. What still moves us now is what moved us half a century ago – the living spirit of the young girl herself, triumphing not only over the deadly men who destroyed her but also over the deadening passage of time which destroys everything, speaking in a conversational tone to an imaginary friend about ordinary life under the shadow of extraordinary death. She had ambitions to be a writer and showed considerable promise, but her actual work has a force beyond anything she could have imagined, not so much in her formal fiction as in her informal journal.

The final point is that this is above all a moral document. Pascal said three centuries ago that man is only a reed, the weakest thing in the universe, but is greater than the universe because he is a *thinking* reed. Anne Frank was only a weak child, but she was greater than her murderers because she kept her humanity when they lost theirs. She wrote: "I want to go on living even after my death," which is what she did and does, while they perished as though they had never been.

She also kept her personality, which still leaps from the page. Her family tried to control her adolescent rebelliousness but never suppressed her essential individuality. It is interesting to wonder what it was based on. She was religious, but only in moderation. Like so many German Jewish refugees, the Frank family were far from Orthodox. They said private prayers, but didn't make much of formal festivals. She was even given a New Testament so that she would learn about Christianity as well as Judaism. She believed in God to the end, at least of the *Diary*, but not so much in a divine being as in the universal force of Nature or Life – as she explained in her unfinished story *Cady's Life*.

Soon after her fifteenth birthday she wrote: "A religion, it doesn't matter which, keeps a person on the right path. It isn't the fear of God but the upholding of one's own honour and conscience." At the same time, despite what was happening to her, she wrote: "I still believe in the essential goodness of people." One can only wonder what she thought during the terrible last months, though the testimony of survivors suggests that she remained herself to the end. In her last diary, she wrote in German at the front, "Man must have zest," and in French at the back, "Be nice and keep courage."

As D H Lawrence said, ours is a tragic age. But while there are people like Anne Frank and books like her *Diary*, there is still hope.



● The statue of Anne Frank near Prinsengracht, Amsterdam. Photograph: Pam Brearey.

about so many later horrors, it is still a profoundly powerful document, and reading it is still a moving experience – as is a visit to the carefully preserved Anne Frank House on Prinsengracht in Amsterdam.

The latest editions have provided much extra material, but the addition of more intimate details of life in hiding (personal,

● The latest English-language versions of Anne Frank's *Diary* are published in Britain by Viking: *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Critical Edition*, 734 pages, £30; *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition*, 350 pages, £16.

# Notorious antagonist of Christian practice

**G**EORGE ELIOT, or Marian Evans as she then was, came to London to lodge with the publisher John Chapman in 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition. On October 3 of that year she met Herbert Spencer, sub-editor of *The Economist* and, three days later, she was introduced to George Henry Lewes, co-editor of *The Leader*, for which she had just written a review of a book, *The Creed of Christendom*. She fell in love with Spencer, who turned down her overtures but remained a lifelong friend – and bachelor. And it was Spencer who, when Lewes died, declared that the devotion between Lewes and Marian “exceeded that of any married pair I have known”.

Marian had already translated Strauss’ critical *Life of Jesus* from the German, which Chapman had published in three anonymous volumes. Strongly religious in youth – to the extent of refusing to go to the theatre on a visit to London with her brother and telling a correspondent that it “would not cost me any regrets if the only music heard in our land were that of strict worship” – she had read prodigiously and become increasingly sceptical. Or, as one of her Christian friends put it, strayed “into the dark regions of infidelity”.

Loss of faith was a heart-wrenching experience, bringing her into conflict with her father and brother, but it liberated her mind “from the wretched giant’s bed of dogmas on which it has been racked and stretched ever since it began to think”, enabling her to absorb “the bracing air of independence”.

She was also developing a deterministic philosophy from which, as Rosemary Ashton remarks, she would never deviate, and which Marian herself expressed as: “recognition of the presence of undeviating law in the material and moral world – of that invariability of sequence which is acknowledged to be the basis of physical science, but which is still perversely ignored in our social organisation, our ethics and our religion”.

As George Eliot, “she would embody imaginatively, through plot development and charac-

**George Eliot, A Life by Rosemary Ashton. Hamish Hamilton. £25.00.**

**Review: COLIN McCALL**

ter analysis, the ideas expressed here about ‘the inexorable consequences’ in all branches of human knowledge and activity”, says Professor Ashton, who later considers the novels with this in mind. But they were some time ahead, and Lewes was to play a significant part in their genesis.

In 1851 Chapman also bought the *Westminster Review* and installed Marian as editor; and Lewes contributed an article to her first issue, January 1852. Fluent in French, German and Spanish, with a knowledge of Italian, Latin and Greek, he had published “two not very good novels”, his two-volume *Biographical History of Philosophy*, which first stimulated Spencer’s interest in the subject, and a book on Spanish drama. He was later to write a much-acclaimed *Life of Goethe* – for which Marian helped in the extensive research – and the three-volume *Problems of Life and Mind*, the last two volumes of which Marian saw through the press after his death.

Intellectually, Lewes and Marian were ideally matched. They were, as Professor Ashton says, “both free thinkers ... well versed in European languages and literature, with a special interest in German literature and Goethe in particular ... both were acquainted with recent scientific progress, Lewes in a practising capacity as well as a theoretical one; both were conversant with ancient and modern philosophy and shared an enthusiasm for Comte’s Positive Philosophy, which substituted social science for religious belief”. It should be noted, however, that Lewes rejected Comte’s pseudo-religious writings.

Marian Evans and George Henry Lewes decided to live openly together first in Germany, where he could also research for his *Life of Goethe*. She had just completed a translation of Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* and resigned as unpaid editor of the *Westminster Review*, and her happiness at

this time is reflected in an article she wrote calling for “the whole field of reality “ to be “laid open to woman as well as man”; for “that marriage of minds which alone can blend all the hues of thought and feeling in one lovely rainbow of promise for the harvest of human happiness”.

Feted in Germany, by Liszt among others, they returned in 1855 to a very different reception in England. Marian was even shunned by Thomas and Jane Carlyle, although Lewes continued to visit them; one Christian Socialist (Charles Kingsley) wrote to another (F D Maurice) referring to “Miss Evans, the infidel *esprit forte* who is now G H Lewes’s concubine”; and a “deeply mortified and distressed” phrenologist former friend wondered if there was “insanity” in her family.

But work continued and Marian finished a translation of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, “particularly congenial” to her, though not in fact published until 1981. Both she and Lewes were great admirers of Spinoza as, indeed, had been Goethe.

And George Eliot shared Spinoza’s philosophical determinism. She believed, as Professor Ashton says, “that human beings are determined by family likeness and social circumstance – what would later in the century be called heredity and environment – from which it follows logically that we should show tolerance towards people’s faults. To understand all should be to forgive all”.

In her novels she is tolerant of weak and selfish people, but “her belief in a kind of determinism by which character carries its own consequence or Nemesis, leads her in effect often to punish such characters by withholding happiness from them while seeing and sympathising with the mitigating circumstances of their cases”.

And although she treated religion sympathetically and understood when people turned to the “forms and ceremonies” for comfort, she preferred “to do without opium”.

It was only in her late thirties that, encouraged by Lewes, George Eliot’s “unusual life bore its literary fruit”. She was, in Rosemary Ashton’s view, “the greatest of novelists and most controversial of women”; and the controversy continued after she died. John Cross, whom she married after Lewes’ death, petitioned the Dean of Westminster for her to be buried in the Abbey; and he was supported by Herbert Spencer, John Tyndall and others; but John Morley and T H Huxley, who both admired her, considered that would be inappropriate for one “whose life and opinions were in notorious antagonism to Christian practice”. That view prevailed, so she was buried in Highgate Cemetery, near to Lewes, the man she described as “the prime blessing that has made all the rest possible to me ...”.

Rosemary Ashton has previously written a biography of George Henry Lewes; this one of George Eliot makes as fine a pair as one can imagine.

## Daftness in Dixieland

**TWO** new places of pilgrimage were announced in the southern states of the USA at the end of last year. A vision of the Virgin Mary appeared on a glass-fronted bank in Clearwater, Florida, causing Catholics to fall on their knees and pray; and Mother Teresa’s face was seen on the wrinkled surface of a cinnamon bun, which was being displayed in the Bongo Java coffee shop in Nashville, Tennessee.

Sceptics suggested that the image of the

BVM was caused by light refracted by some nearby water sprinklers, but one of the nuns holding vigil outside the bank saw it as a sign from God “telling us to change our ways”. In what direction wasn’t recorded.

The Nashville coffee shop proprietor, Bob Bernstein, has really gone to town. Visitors can buy nunbun tee-shirts, bookmarks, prayer cards, even a video in which a squirrel steals and munches the bun (*Sunday Telegraph*, January 12).

And, most appropriately, mugs. CMcC

Terry Sanderson on the media

## NO END TO THE MYSTIC MUGS

OF ALL the religious affairs correspondents on the national newspapers, Clifford Longley in the *Daily Telegraph* is probably the most irritating. His "traditionalist" stance on social issues can really get the hackles up. It was gratifying, therefore, to see him come a cropper last month when, in his column on February 7, he wrote: "Anglican churchmen have an unusual spring in their step. Many of them say they detect a new mood of optimism in their congregations. The long-term fall in church attendance seems to have halted, and when the next set of figures is published shortly, there may even be the first signs of recovery and growth."

Unfortunately, the new figures had been released that very day, and on page seven of the same issue of the *Telegraph* in which Mr Longley's prophetic words were published, you could read a news item headlined: "Church numbers still falling."

Given Mr Longley's discomfiture over this news, I think we should wallow in it a little longer: "Church attendance has experienced its biggest drop in the past 20 years. The figures for 1995 contradict claims that the decline in the number of people going to church had ended after three decades. Average total Sunday attendance for the Church of England was 1,045,000 in 1995, down 36,000 on 1994."

Dear, oh dear. Mr Longley's predictions are almost as good as those of Mystic Meg. That is to say, they're crap. And I'm not the only one who thinks so. The naughty Victor Lewis-Smith was doing one of his excellent hatchet jobs on Mystic Meg in the *Daily Mirror*, prompted by the news that the glamorous seer had not been selected to take part in the Wednesday Lottery draw TV show.

Mr Lewis-Smith says that he could do the job better himself. He will not, however, employ a crystal ball, the I Ching or tea leaves. For him "the portents are all in the handkerchief". He says that if he gets Meg's job he will get a particularly fluey member of the audience to blow into his "magic Kleenex" and advise them that "the mucus cannot lie. Now hand me your hanky and I will open it to reveal the future. O calamity, I see two bogies intersected by a streak of dark green snot - the auguries are not good." Victor insists that this method is no more ridiculous than "counting how many heavenly bodies are nestling on the cusp of Uranus."

BUT SUPERSTITION is stronger than its critics, as demonstrated by the congregation of the Elim Pentecostal Church in Coventry. They were taken in by a young man, Paul Redhead, who thought it would be a jolly wheeze to buy himself a wheelchair and tell the churchgoers that he was unable to walk or take care of himself.

No-one can criticise the congregation for trying to help him, but then Mr Redhead became fed up with the confines of the wheelchair and, according to *The Guardian*, decided to stage a

"miracle" recovery at one of the church's "healing" services. This he duly did, jumping from the chair and running round the church. At his trial for fraud, Mr Redhead said: "The church fell down at my feet. I was more famous than Jesus. They treated me like God. I feel sorrow and pity for every churchgoer for they are all trapped in a world with a religious mental illness."

This may be true, but he could have made his point much better by joining the National Secular Society. As it turned out, he got 15 months and a very bad press.

MEANWHILE, over in the Italian city of Civitavecchia, the *Daily Telegraph* tells us, yet another plaster statue of the Madonna has been "weeping blood". A Vatican commission has proclaimed the tears to be a miracle, but this has not gone unchallenged. The Italian Consumer Association, Codacons, has reported the theological commission to the authorities accusing it of "abusing public credulity" which is, sensibly, against the law in Italy.

Inevitably, there have also been reports of the disabled being healed and all the other guff that goes with this kind of con job.

Civitavecchia is a run-down port in the depths of a recession. The statue has brought new hope to the town and it is planned that as well as a shrine there will be a new shopping precinct, two hotels, thermal baths and a theme park. These will result in 2,000 jobs and an investment of £400 million. Well, if you can

build an economic recovery on a pack of lies, why not? It worked for Lourdes - why not Civitavecchia?

ALTHOUGH, unlike the Italians, we do not have a law forbidding exploitation of the gullible, we do, apparently, have one to protect us from "aggressive preaching".

This was demonstrated recently in York when a particularly fanatical group of born-again Christians, calling themselves Faith Ministries, was pelted with eggs when they preached hell fire and damnation for homosexuals in a city street. A witness told *The Times*: "They had a huge crowd gathered round, and they were shouting at the tops of their voices for people to save themselves. You could tell there was going to be trouble. One started shouting about homosexuality, and that people who practised it would rot in hell."

That's when the groceries started flying.

Pastor Phil Dacre, of Faith Ministries, said: "For the past six months, since the Lord told us to go out and preach and proclaim, we have sent out teams to Yorkshire telling people to repent. This team were asked by the Lord to visit York, but it seemed that the people of that city did not want to hear the message."

For their own safety, the evangelists were carted off to the police station and charged with causing a breach of the peace by aggressive preaching.

York will no doubt now be known in evangelical circles as Sodom-on-Ouse.

## A flourishing *FT* needs many more to join the band of benefactors

WHAT have *The Freethinker* and the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* got in common? They are both run at a loss - but there's quite a difference in the amount of the loss.

*Time's* review of a new book, *Inside the Vatican*, by a Jesuit priest, Thomas J Reese (January 13) informs us that *L'Osservatore Romano* loses more than \$3 million a year.

Well, yes, but the publishers of *L'Osservatore Romano* can grab a handful of Peter's Pence, figuratively speaking, when their creditors become pressing. At *The Freethinker* the situation is somewhat different: the only handful we have available is the handful of readers who contribute to our fund.

We are grateful to those who do donate - but if our atheist journal is to flourish we need many more generous folk to join the band of givers.

Let the Vatican Bank take care of *L'Osservatore Romano*. Cheques and POs

for atheism, made payable to GWFoote & Co., should be sent to Freethinker Fund, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP.

Many thanks to: A Stevens, £40; S Reid, A Stephens, £30 each; D Bressan, T Forrest, £27 each; H Jakeman, C Pinel, S Trent, £20 each; J Dobbin, J Markey, N Ratcliffe, £15 each; F Abel, P Barbour, S Chumbley, G Clarke, E Crapper, C Lovett, G Miller, I Payne, D Pollock, J Rees, I Wilcock, £10 each; D Bird, £7; M Aitchison, L Bessant, P Brown, F Dent, J Hill, J Hopkin, N Huke, A Negus, A Oldham, C Oram, M Skinner, D Wignall, £5 each; S Crutchley, B Edgcombe, J Horsford, H McNaughton, S Rayment, £3 each; M Gilbert, A Jones, G Shepherd, £2 each; B Downs, £1.

Total from January 21 to February 23: £458.00

KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD (right) reports on a ga  
 Union – billed as ‘the highest profile religion deba

# ‘Cold dagger of strikes at Car

**T**HE Commons-style chamber of the Cambridge University Union provided a splendid setting for a fascinating debate on January 30. The motion was that *This house believes the history of the twentieth century disproves the existence of a loving and personal God.* Unable to resist such a challenge, the Humanists and Secularists rolled out a triumvirate of presidents – namely, Professor Sir Hermann Bondi (British Humanist Association), Daniel O’Hara (National Secular Society) and Barbara Smoker (immediate past-President of the NSS). Even the Roman Catholic *Tablet* described our line-up as formidable.

Both Daniel O’Hara and Barbara Smoker drew attention to the flaw in the motion – it required a negative to be proved. They argued that it was up to the opposition to prove the existence of God. Barbara added, for good measure, that there was more evidence for the existence of the Tooth Fairy and Father Christmas than of God; at least they left something material behind! God, she said, was only an idea, not a reality.

The student opening on our side, Mike Tindale, of Wolfson College, maintained that the manifest world-wide suffering in this century made the concept of a loving God insupportable. He said God was a construct of our minds and a cop-out for those seeking explanations. He believed in the Golden Rule (later attributed by the Salvation Army’s *War Cry* to Jesus in Luke 6:31: “Do to others as you would have them do to you”).



● Barbara Smoker

Hannah Reynolds (of Homerton College and a part-time Sunday School teacher) opened for the opposi-

tion by contending that man had to have his free will, that God had created the Devil and also given him freewill, and that syphilis and AIDS could not be counted against God because they were man’s own fault. She felt that war was becoming less bloody; WWII was “better” than WWI and the Falklands War “better” than either.

Barbara then countered the opposition leader by asking why the Devil had been created by God if he knew the Devil would frustrate his plans. The commandants of the death camps, she contended, had a great deal more freewill than their victims – but even the commandants were subject to their genes, and to Nazi propaganda. She added that volcanoes were clearly not a function of man’s freewill. The present century, she said, was distinguished from all past history by the global view we were given by modern means of communication. No one with access to a TV set could be ignorant of the extent of suffering in the world – that of animals as well as humans.

Her anecdotal tale about Bertrand Russell raised smiles on both sides. Asked what he would say to God at the Pearly Gates if it turned out that he had been wrong. Russell responded: “I would say – Lord, you didn’t give us enough evidence!”

Daniel O’Hara explained, to general amusement, that until he had “seen the light” his career had closely paralleled that of his opposite number in the debate, the Rt Rev Dr Geoffrey Rowell, Bishop of Basingstoke.

Daniel attacked revelation as being deluded or fraudulent, a point reported in the *War Cry*.

His quote about God from Epicurus met with nods of agreement: “Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?”

Daniel wound up by saying that against his former colleague, Bishop Rowell, there was



● Daniel O’Hara

not only the history of the twentieth century, the logic of Hume, the discoveries and theories of Darwin, Turing, Hubble and their successors but also two centuries of scholarly biblical criticism. These together were sufficient to disabuse any honest and open-minded person of belief in a loving

and personal God.

In its report of the debate, *The Tablet* described the Hume quotations as “sceptical syllogisms that strike with the cold dagger of atheism” – quite a compliment, really.

Our opponents claimed, extraordinarily, that the degree of suffering was irrelevant – even citing examples such as the Black Death killing one-third of the population, the Spanish Inquisition, two World Wars and Stalin’s gulags.

They told us that the testaments were borne out of suffering, that people found God in sacrifice and that God was revealed in the crucified Christ.

Who was it who said, we heard every cliché from “God is love” to “Gentleman lift the seat”?

Faith, they contended, was personal not intellectual; we might have agreed if they had said it was devoid of reason also. Perversely, we were accused of arrogance in trying to argue people out of God.

Curiously, the Bishop complained about this “terrible freedom all we humans have”, doubtless another reference to free will. He admitted that believers had the problem of evil but claimed that “non-believers have the problem of good”.

Our readers will agree with one of his statements – that all religions are socially, psychologically and economically condi-



gathering of the Cambridge  
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## *Tooth Fairy and Santa more credible than God*

tioned. For a moment, I thought we had a convert from the other side. A speaker from the floor said: "Believe in yourself and humans ...", but spoiled it by adding: "... because the power to do so is given by God."

Sir Hermann – former Master of Churchill College – summed up for the proposers in his measured and deliberate style.

The idea of God, he said, came from revelation. We could see how many different religions maintained their God was the only true one. He concluded from this that, as they were mutually exclusive, the majority (presumably all, or nearly all) of these religions were wrong. He then attacked the arrogance of religion. Hermann was convinced that belief in a loving and personal God led to fanaticism. We should stress what bound us and put on the back-burner that which divided us.

The last speaker may be said to have exemplified the fanaticism to which Sir Hermann referred. Rabbi Shmuel Boteach, the so-called Moses of Oxford, closed for the opposition with a speech – perhaps I should say a rant. He seemed impervious to corrections and interventions, of which there were plenty. He patronised several speakers, asking one: "You gave a great speech, what are you on? You must give me some." His antics clearly discomfited several fellow opposition speakers. Despite being more than three times as long as any other contribution, and containing frequent insulting digressions, the speech drew no directions from the Chair.

He conceded that there had been atrocities committed in the name of religion, but "these are nothing to the deaths from atheism".

He talked of Jewish "decent morality". Although all the other opponents had agreed they had no moral superiority over atheists, he disparaged atheists' morals: "You believe nothing, Where do your morals come from?" He asked Barbara Smoker whether a child born severely defective should be put to death. She said yes. He characterised her

view as agreeing with Hitler. He finished to loud applause. Predictably, for a Catholic organ, *The Tablet* wondered if this was the moment that the motion was lost.

There were many more sitting on the opposition benches than on ours, suggesting a full turn-out by the religionists (which is always the case at Oxbridge debates of this nature) and we lost by 39 votes to 101, with 31 abstentions. The standard of the students' debate was disappointing, as was the lack of effective chairing. The evening demonstrated that rabble-rousing is alive and well, even at the Cambridge Union.

But the debate was not entirely without humour. There was dark talk of manacles and crosses and our opponents seemed relieved not to have their invited speaker Anne Widdicombe speaking for them. However, the highlight of the evening for me was the Rabbi's taunt "Who are the biggest joke to the Jews?"; after a theatrical pause, he turned to his neighbour and boomed, to his own evident satisfaction, "The Christians!" The Bishop looked as if he was praying for a miracle, for the earth to open up and swallow him.

Regrettably, for the splendidly-robed Dr Rowell, the Almighty must have been otherwise engaged.

## Presidential points

DANIEL O'HARA asked: How could anyone ever conclusively disprove the alleged existence of leprechauns in Ireland, of a Wedgwood tea-pot in orbit around the planet Mars, of alien responsibility for corn-circles? Yet most of us strongly disbelieve in such things, and rightly so, for we recognise that the onus of proof lies with those who assert such things, not with those who deny them.

Yet some would argue that if we cannot actually disprove some proposition, we are equally entitled to believe it or not, as fancy takes us. This extreme relativism is exemplified by the American philosopher, Paul Feyerabend. He said of a friend who claimed he could transform himself at will into a raven, that there is no reason to doubt him. But would you buy a used car from such a man? Sadly, many gullible people do buy equally bizarre ideas from peddlers of so-called "new age" religions.

But are the older and more "respectable" religions ... any better? I'm afraid not. They all rely equally on a doctrine of "revelation", occult channels of knowledge – the Bible, the Pope or mystical experiences which they claim give them privileged access to otherwise unavailable truth. It is this claim to a form of knowledge that is immune to empirical scrutiny and rational criticism – entailed in all systems of religious belief – that I consider deluded if not downright fraudulent. Such belief-systems nevertheless beguile many people and make a great deal of money for a few. However seductive they appear, ultimately they are very destructive ...

It would be mere parochialism to pretend that there is anything uniquely horrible about this century. Although the means of terror and destruction have become more sophisticated, and the scale of genocide may have increased, human nature has not materially changed. There is still the same mixture of love and hate, creativity and destructiveness as there has always been. In truth, there was never any good reason to believe in a loving, personal god ...

As Hume noted, we experience a world of "mixed phenomena" – good and evil. Therefore, if there should be any "power" behind the universe, we may not attribute to it either perfect goodness or perfect malice: nor even a mixture of the two (since general laws are so uniform). We must conclude with Hume's Philo that: "the original source of all things ... has no more regard to good above ill than to heat above cold, or to drought above moisture or to light above heavy" ...

# WHEN LIFE IS INTOLERABLE

**T**HE news that the Home Secretary had confirmed the earlier decision that Myra Hindley should be kept in prison for the rest of her natural life was immediately followed by news of a request by her partner in crime, Ian Brady, for voluntary euthanasia; and one wondered if he was jumping on the Hindley publicity bandwagon. It transpired, however, that he had been making the same request repeatedly for the whole of the 11 years he has been in the high-security hospital, Rampton – for, unlike Hindley, he was certified insane and removed from an ordinary prison.

When my brother was doing his National Service in the army, he was friendly with a fellow conscript who, having murdered an officer and been committed to Broadmoor, later wrote to my brother saying how much better life was in there than in the army. However, whereas my brother returned to civilian life a couple of years later, his erstwhile friend the murderer is presumably still detained. As with the concept of Hell, or with the actuality of an incurable illness or disability, the worst aspect of such a fate is its permanence – the deprivation of any hope of light at the end of the tunnel. And it precludes any pretence that the purpose of punishment is rehabilitation.

## Aversion

Brady's situation is no doubt exacerbated by the aversion of his fellow inmates for him – since those who have merely murdered adults generally look down on child-murderers. So Brady's wish for euthanasia is sane enough, however insane he may be in other respects.

I was asked on February 11 to take on Judge Pickles in a late-night BBC radio discussion and phone-in on this news item. The retired circuit judge – a nephew of the radio entertainer Wilfred Pickles – has long carried on the family entertainment tradition, and is well known for his unpredictability.

On the present occasion, he was at least predictable in his insistence on the illegality of voluntary euthanasia in this country; and of course I agreed with him on that, making the point that until voluntary euthanasia is legalised for the terminally-ill it is hardly likely to be made legal for Ian Brady. But Pickles went on to assert that it was not only illegal but also, without exception, immoral – as, he said, was suicide; whereas I argued that they could be compassionate and rational, and therefore moral.

by Barbara Smoker

My opponent then did a characteristic U-turn by saying that if Brady, like Fred West, were to take his own life no one would shed any tears over that. So there are apparently exceptions to the immorality of suicide after all.

However, it did not seem to occur to Judge Pickles that even unsupervised people do not always find it easy to end their own lives – there have been doctors of medicine who, taking what they believed to be a lethal dose of a drug, have succeeded only in damaging their brains or livers – and it might be even more difficult for an inmate of Rampton to take his own life than for a prisoner on remand. Pickles mentioned the almost foolproof method of a hosepipe fixed to the exhaust-pipe of a car – but is Brady likely to have access to a car, a suitable hosepipe, and the lengthy seclusion necessary to carry out this operation?

On the wider question of voluntary euthanasia for terminal illness or (in my view even more important) for an incurable severe disability which the patient finds intolerable, Pickles was adamant that this must never be legalised; and we argued over that.

The listeners who then phoned in seemed almost entirely motivated by vindictive feelings towards Brady; but, strangely enough, came down on opposite sides of the argument: one saying that Brady deserves to be incarcerated for life, however long that may be, while another said he deserves to die as soon as possible. While vindictive feelings are understandable enough in the light of the terrible crimes he committed, they hardly make a good foundation for penology, let alone for treatment of the insane. It is essential that our feelings in such matters be controlled by reason.

An eminent exponent of the desirability of killing the criminally insane was Bernard Shaw. He was opposed to the whole concept of punishment, but saw the need for protecting the public against incurable criminals.

When, at the turn of the century, he was asked to write a preface to a Fabian pamphlet on imprisonment, he wrote that while he regarded capital punishment as abhorrent, a quick death would be far better, from everybody's standpoint, than lifelong incarceration. However, the Quaker author of the pamphlet refused to accept the preface if it were to advocate the killing of convicted prisoners. Shaw then agreed to rewrite this paragraph, saying that lengthy prison sentences might be imposed, as long as there were enough Quakers willing to act as guards!

In his play *Saint Joan*, Shaw makes Joan retract her confession when she realises

that she is to be imprisoned for life: she prefers the fire. In one of his last plays, *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*, Shaw depicts the mysterious disappearance, suddenly and painlessly, of those who do not pull their weight in the social boat. And in his book *Everybody's Political What's What*, written in his late eighties, Shaw writes: "... there are people like Ibsen's Peer Gynt, who funk doing anything irrevocable, and will commit the horrible atrocity of imprisoning a human creature for life rather than mercifully kill him anaesthetically, and, if possible, without his knowing it".

Only the final phrase is repugnant to me. In the name of a basic human right, not only should the alternative of death be dependent, over a reasonable period of time, upon the free choice of the prisoner himself; there is also a general evil in killing people without warning – for once the practice became known, everyone at risk would live in perpetual fear of immediate extinction. Shaw himself was aware of this, but actually suggested extending the risk from criminal psychopaths to the idle rich – thinking it "would produce a sense of social responsibility"! I can only assume that he was playing the octogenarian *enfant terrible*.

## Dots

● Coincidentally, the very day of this radio discussion of mine, the *Nursing Standard* carried an article by the prolifer Peggy Norris in which – intent on proving that, if voluntary euthanasia is legalised, "the slide to involuntary killing will occur" – she quoted several sentences from an article I wrote in 1991 for the journal of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society. However, she put three little innocuous-looking dots in the middle of the quotation, to replace two entire sentences that happened to be essential to the context. Fortunately, I was able to unearth the original, and have now written to the journal asking for the omitted sentences to be published.

They were as follows: "The two most important criteria are surely the intolerable nature of the condition and its incurability – the proper question being whether an intolerable condition is apparently incurable, not whether it is terminal. As for the voluntary element, this is, of course, fundamental in the case of adult patients who are capable of communication, but in many other cases it cannot apply."

If I believed in lifelong imprisonment, I might reserve it for those who quote others' words out of context!

The Pope and evolution:

# No advance on creationism

IT WASN'T clear from the English newspaper reports how far the Pope had gone towards accepting evolution when he addressed the Pontifical Academy of Sciences last October. "Pope places some faith in Darwin's theory of evolution", headlined *The Times*; "Vatican's slow evolution as it discovers Darwin", declared *The Independent*.

At the time I doubted the accuracy of their references to Darwin, and felt pretty sure that His Holiness wouldn't have mentioned natural selection ("Down to Earth" December 1996). It turns out that I was right on both counts. He made no mention of either. Now, thanks to Stuart Campbell, of Edinburgh, I have the full text of the papal statement, *Evolution and the Origins of Man*, and it is worth looking at in some detail.

After expressing his pleasure at being at the plenary assembly and remembering the academicians who had died during the past year, whom he commended "to the Lord of Life", John Paul II recalled the intentions of his predecessor, Pius XI, in setting up the Pontifical Academy. Pius wished to surround himself with a select group of scholars, who could be relied on to inform the Holy See "in complete freedom" about scientific developments and, thereby, "assist him in his reflections".

Pius asked those whom he called the Church's *Senatus scientificus* "to serve the truth"; and John Paul extended the same invitation to them, "certain that we will be able to profit from the fruitfulness of a trustful dialogue between the Church and science".

He liked the first theme the academicians had chosen, the origins of life and evolution, "an essential subject" which deeply concerned the Church. "How do the conclusions reached by the various scientific disciplines coincide with those contained in the message of Revelation?" he asked. "And if, at first sight, there are apparent contradictions, in what direction do we look for their solution?"

You will have noted the qualifications, "at first sight" and "apparent contradictions", and remembered that the academicians were asked "to serve the truth". But what truth? we may ask.

The Pope recognised that "truth cannot contradict truth", and he reminded the assembly that Pius XII, in his encyclical *Humani generis* (1950) had stated that there was no opposition between evolution and the doctrine of the faith about man. But again, there was an important qualification, "on condition that one did not lose sight of several indisputable points", religious "points", that is.

John Paul also recalled his own speech to the assembly on October 31 1992, when "I had the opportunity with regard to Galileo, to draw attention to the need of a rigorous

by Colin McCall

hermeneutic for the correct interpretation of the inspired words".

At which point we are entitled to a little recollection of our own. Let us go back to June 22, 1633, when the 70-year-old Galileo was threatened with torture and "kneeling before you, most Eminent and Reverend Lord Cardinals, Inquisitors general against heretical depravity throughout the whole Christian Republic", was forced to "abandon the false opinion that the sun is the centre of the world and immovable, and that the earth is not the centre of the world, and moves, and that I must not hold, defend, or teach ... the said doctrine", which was "contrary to Holy Scripture".

He had to "abjure, curse, and detest the aforesaid error and heresies, and generally, every other error and sect whatever contrary to the said Holy Church".

What was a "false opinion", "contrary to the said Holy Church" has now been accepted, three and a half centuries later, by the said Holy Church. Falsehood has become truth with the aid of John Paul's "rigorous hermeneutic". As if interpretation had anything to do with the question. The Inquisition was right: Galileo's teaching was contrary to Holy Scripture, hermeneutic or no hermeneutic. And it is hard to believe that the Pope doesn't realise it.

**As with Paul XII, man's immortal soul affords the escape route: "if the human body takes its origin from pre-existent living matter, the spiritual soul is immediately created by God".**

He conceded that, "In order to delineate the field of their own study, the exegete and the theologian must keep informed about the results achieved by the natural sciences". In other words, the Church must not make the mistake again of denouncing a scientific discovery as contrary to Holy Scripture: hermeneutics must be employed to find "the correct interpretation of the inspired word"; to show that it means something different, even contrary to what it says.

Pius XII's *Humani generis* considered the doctrine of "evolutionism" a serious hypothesis, said John Paul, "worthy of an in-depth study equal to that of the opposing hypothesis". That opposing hypothesis is creationism, as set forth in the Bible and taught by

the Roman Catholic Church. Today, said the Pope, almost half a century after the publication of the encyclical, "new knowledge has led us to the recognition of more than one hypothesis in the theory of evolution". He didn't mention that the encyclical itself appeared 91 years after the publication of the *Origin of Species* (1869).

And I must emphasise here again that, in his great book, Darwin was presenting his theory of how evolution takes place – through natural selection. That evolution does take place can no longer be in doubt.

To some extent, John Paul recognised the distinction, although he didn't mention Darwin or natural selection, and referred instead to "materialist, reductionist and spiritualist interpretations" of evolution. What is to be decided here, he said, "is the true role of philosophy and beyond it, of theology". Beyond it indeed.

"The Church's Magisterium", he continued, is directly concerned with the question of evolution because it involves "the conception of man". According to Genesis (1:27-29) man was created in the image and likeness of God. How can hermeneutics be employed to reconcile that with evolution? Well, man is "the only creature on earth that God has wanted for its own sake"; the human individual cannot be "subordinated ... either to the species or to society; he has value per se", as, presumably, the other animals don't.

Citing St Thomas Aquinas that man's likeness to God resides in his speculative intellect; adding that "man is called to enter into a relationship of knowledge and love with God himself ... which will find its complete fulfilment beyond time in eternity", John Paul found his way out of the dilemma.

As with Paul XII, man's immortal soul affords the escape route: "if the human body takes its origin from pre-existent living matter, the spiritual soul is immediately created by God". Consequently, John Paul concluded, "theories of evolution which, in accordance with the philosophies inspiring them, consider the mind as emerging from the forces of living matter, or as a mere epiphenomenon of this matter, are incompatible with the truth about man".

So that is the extent of the Pope's acceptance of evolution, and it shows no real advance on *Humani generis*. He may, in his convoluted way, admit the possibility of humanity's bodily evolution, which in itself contradicts the Holy Word, but he cannot dispense with divine intervention. That would be to surrender everything, to give up the ghost, as you might say.

God, then, may not have made man in his own image and likeness, as the Bible says and the Church has always taught but, by golly, he still gives us that final touch which makes us a "person". Perhaps that was the truth for which the Church's *Senatus scientificus* was told to search.

## Persecution of Witches:

# HOW DAMP DREAMS PERTURBED PRIESTS

by Carl Pinel

**T**HERE has been a renewed interest in witchcraft resulting from a preoccupation with New Age religions, occultism and the impending so-called millennium.

"Witch" derives from "wicca" which means sorcerer. Simple sorcery is found worldwide and in almost every period of human history. It is estimated that today there are fewer than 100,000 followers of witchcraft practising their religious rituals in semi-secret covens in different parts of the world.

Gerald Gardner (1884-1964) fraudulently claimed that the group which he formed was the continuation of an ancient religion. The anthropologist Margaret Murray (1863-1963) also considered that modern witchcraft represented a continuation of the pagan religion of pre-Christian Europe. Her ideas, which were influential from the 1920s to the 1950s, are now rejected by most scholars. Neo-paganism is influenced by nature religion, fertility rituals and worship of a Mother Goddess. These beliefs, while borrowed from ancient religions, nevertheless form a distinct new religion.

Modern witches reject belief in the Devil, which is perceived as a Christian and not a pagan doctrine. But, ironically, it was the association of witchcraft with diabolism which led to their persecution in late mediaeval and early modern Europe. The first formal trial of heretics was held in Orleans in 1022, and, although heresy and witchcraft were separate issues, the accusation of the religious "crime" of heresy soon became equated with the secular "crime" of witchcraft.

Between 1450 and 1700, at the height of the persecution of witches, as many as 200,000 people may have been killed. The persecution of witches increased considerably after Pope Innocent VIII issued a Bull, *Summis Desiderantes Affectibus*, in 1484. In the same year, he appointed the Dominican friars Jakob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer as inquisitors. Their notorious, anti-feminine diatribe *Malleus Maleficarum* (*Hammer of the Witches*) appeared in 1486 and led to three times as many women being prosecuted for witchcraft as men.

Trethowan (1963) considers that castration

anxieties and the sadistic tendencies of a celibate clergy played a part in the vindictive attitude shown towards women. Andrea Dworkin (1987) discusses the sexual anxieties of the persecutors: "The witches have sex with men while they sleep; they use a man against his will, especially at night when he is asleep and helpless. He ejaculates: proof that, by magic, a woman came to him in the night and did something to or with his penis. In these circumstances, then, the charge of witchcraft was a male charge of rape."

The prosecution of witches in Britain increased after King James VI of Scotland (later to become James I of England) published *Daemonologie* in 1597. He commissioned a translation of the scriptures – the Authorised Version of the Bible – which deliberately rendered the Hebrew word *Kashshaf* as *witch* to produce the text: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Exodus 22:18). And in 1604 the Witchcraft Statute made it a felony to "consult with, covenant with, employ, feed, or reward any evil or wicked spirit." Thus, sanctioned by the State and sanctified by the Church, the persecution of witches flourished in 17th Century England.

And in Germany, a century earlier, Martin Luther had incited persecution by declaring that all witches should be burnt. Political dissent often incurred a charge of witchcraft: members of the "Free Spirit", a movement which began among Parisian intellectuals gathered around William Aurifex in the early 13th Century, were accused of diabolical crimes when they opposed the totalitarian power of the Catholic Church. The movement lasted for several decades, despite persecution; its members were excommunicated in 1259 and Marguerite Porete was burnt at the stake in 1310. Her pamphlet, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, was covertly distributed for several centuries afterwards.

Lumby (1995) has drawn attention to the fact that personal and religious animosities accounted for many of the accusations of witchcraft in Lancashire, culminating in the execution of 10 Pendle witches in one day in

August 1612. He points out that the historian Hugh Trevor-Roper (1990) found that Catholics executed Protestants and Protestants executed Catholics in Europe – the persecution of witches being particularly common in areas of social tension where the two groups confronted each other.

Gradually, as a more sceptical and humanitarian view prevailed, the persecution of witches ceased, and the last execution for witchcraft in England was carried out in 1684.

America's last executions were carried out in 1692 after the notorious Salem witch trials of 1691-1692. Scotland followed suit in 1727, France in 1745 and Germany in 1775. But as late as 1681 Joseph Glanvill's posthumously published *Saducismus Triumphatus* tried to prove the existence of witches, arguing that anyone who did not believe in witches was denying the existence of God. Glanvill makes a valid point because belief in devils, evil spirits and witches is a religious concept. Religionists need "bogeymen" because God, being a figment of the imagination, is powerless to provide remedies for the suffering and natural disasters which afflict humans.

Worse still, from a religionist's point of view, God could be held responsible for human suffering. Witches and malevolent spirits were scapegoats for the problems of society which religion could not solve. The prosecution of witches and exorcism of devils also created an elite caste of priests whose status, power and wealth was enhanced by their interceding on behalf of religionists while superstitious ideas prevailed.

Today, Christianity is in decline – as belief in malevolent spirits disappears, belief in God withers away also. Consequently, Christianity has lost much of its power to dictate how we should run our lives, create scapegoats or persecute dissidents.

But if Christianity is in decline, Islamic fundamentalism has shown just how dangerous religion still can be. And just as the social tensions of mediaeval Europe led to an increase in the persecution of witches, modern history has led to scapegoats being made of different groups who are demonised by scurrilous propaganda to justify social ostracism, murder and genocide. These persecuted groups are the real heirs of the witches, scapegoats for the problems of society, rather than the strange, but inoffensive, people who worship trees or the Midwinter Sun.

**REFERENCES:** Dworkin, A (1987) *Intercourse*. Secker and Warburg, London. Lumby, J (1995) *The Lancashire Witch-Craze*. Carnegie Publishing, Preston. Russell, J B (1987) "Concepts of Witchcraft" in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* vol.15, pp 415-423. Macmillan Publishing Co., New York. Trethowan, W H (1963) "The Demonopathology of Impotence", *British Journal of Psychiatry* 109,341-347. Trevor-Roper, H R (1978) *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. Pelican Books. Penguin Books 1990 (cited by Lumby).

## Cosmic Fairy in full flight

**THE next meeting of Ealing Humanist Group on March 27 will see the launch of Arthur Atkinson's new book, *The Cosmic Fairy – the New Challenge of a Darwinian Approach to Humanism*.**

**The meeting will be held at the Friends' Meeting House, Woodville Road, Ealing W5**

**(near Ealing Broadway tube station) at 8pm.**

**Copies of the book will be available from bookshops at £7.50 – or at £6, plus postage, from the BHA, Bradlaugh House, 47 Theobald's Road, London WC1X 8SP (£1 per copy will be donated to the BHA).**

# You're telling us!

## Edward Blishen

I WAS saddened to read of the death of Edward Blishen.

As Bill McIlroy says in his obituary (January), "he was ever obliging and reliable". Aspiring authors and journalists should note that he spoke only when he had something worth saying – either an original viewpoint or old ideas refurbished – and, in an age of the slipshod, carefully crafted whatever he said.

Though I can't claim to have known him well, I immediately formed and retained the impression that here was a nice person in the best sense of that abused word. (A residuum of Christmas spirit – brandy in my case – prevents me from observing that I couldn't say that of all distinguished Humanists and Freethinkers.)

He will be sorely missed.

DAVID TRIBE  
New South Wales

## Sources

IN historical controversies we Rationalists should be setting an example in the critical, responsible use of sources of information. Before printing claims as to matters of fact, you should require contributors and letter-writers to check their facts. Where rumour rules, superstition flourishes.

David H Bird (February) spoils an otherwise fine letter questioning the historical basis of the Jesus story, by saying that the Chinese "never call Jesus by any other name than Fot".

Now I have lived in China, have spoken the language for 35 years and talk with Chinese in Chinese several times each week. Jesus is rarely mentioned, but when he is he is called Yesu, a close approximation to the Latin pronunciation of Jesu ... I have never heard of any Chinese using any other name but Yesu.

Fot is a southern pronunciation of ... the Chinese for Buddha: standard Chinese Fò has lost the final -t. It is one of many words in which ancient initial b- developed into f-, and was originally a close approximation to what we transliterate as Buddh (The final -a implied by Sanskrit spelling is often omitted in Indian speech, as I noticed in the sound-track of the recently finished BBC2 serial *Chanakya*). Japanese, which got the name from Chinese, not directly from India, retains the initial b- and the -t.

Who confused Fot (Buddha) with Yesu (Jesus) I know not, possibly the Beausobre, of whom I had not heard, whom David Bird mentions. Like him, I doubt the historical existence of the Jesus of the Gospels: all I am arguing for here is careful, responsible use of sources.

CONNAIRE KENSIT  
Southsea

## The Bible

WHILE I have some sympathy for Edwin Davey's feeling (February) that we spend a lot of time nit-picking, my own conclusions differ.

There are, in my view, three approaches to the Bible: (1) It is the literal, inerrant word of an omnipotent, omniscient deity. (2) Some of it is

to be taken literally, some allegorically and some metaphorically. (3) It is a collection of primitive creation myths, social control by threats of the ire of a deity and political treatises designed to justify the invasion of Israel by the hordes of King David.

To counter argument number one, we need to point out where the Bible errs. It is hardly an inerrant document which claims that rabbits and hares are ruminants, the value of Pi is 3.0 and, yes, cannot decide on the colour of the robe worn by its so-called messiah at what is supposedly his defining moment. It may be a mis-translation, but this book is riddled with them; I understand that the King James edition deliberately changed a number of references to slaves into references to witches (as in not suffering a witch to live) as a sop to a monarch who fancied himself as a bit of an expert on witchcraft.

Having demolished the first argument, we have to ask of number two: "How are we supposed to know which is which?" Of course, the normal approach of Christians is that the bits which support their own biases and hang-ups are literal, those which don't are allegorical. This is why few, if any, Christians isolate their women for seven days during menstruation, despite this being an instruction to be found in Leviticus (the usual stand-by for homophobes).

So ultimately we reach suggestion number three. Surely this is the most logical conclusion to reach, given the evidence. This is reinforced when we realise that what we see today was selected from the many "holy" sources available at the Council of Carthage in 397CE, and declared to be scripture by a vote of 568 to 563. (Yes a vote, Mr Gummer; there's your precedent for voting for women priests!) The view is reinforced by the miracle that the book of Deuteronomy was miraculously "found" in the temple by King Josiah during a time of reform-formation struggle. By some strange coincidence, it just happened to agree with everything the King wanted.

We must never forget that if they are given free reign, religionists would have no compunction about imposing their views upon the rest of us, by force if necessary (I can think of some Christians who probably think the Taliban are dangerous liberals). Nit-picking it may be, but every little chip we can break off the religious edifice is another chip on the way to true freedom of thought.

TONY GREEN  
Ipswich

I TAKE issue with two of your February correspondents, Edwin Davey and John Clunas.

Mr Davey thinks *The Freethinker* is too anti-religious, and that we are guilty of nit-picking. Of the first, Mr Davey, remember we are the only monthly publication in the UK among the myriad of religious journals to take an opposite position and fight against all the privilege they enjoy and the superstition they perpetrate. As regards nit-picking, his letter answers itself!

Mr Clunas supports the "non-joiners" thinking there is no need for a Humanist movement. I have heard car drivers say there is no need for buses, another said he was surprised they both-er to run trains on a Sunday when he saw so few travellers!

If we all took such an egocentric approach, what a world! There are still many battles

against religion to be fought – blasphemy law is just one. Furthermore, many humanists join groups to meet like-minded folk and enjoy the social intercourse engendered. Mr Clunas completely forgets the thousands who now want Humanist or secular funerals, weddings and baby namings. How are all these needs to be satisfied without a "Humanist movement"?

DENIS COBELL  
Catford

## Weapons

ON July 8 last year, the International Court of Justice (the World Court) ruled that the threat or use of nuclear weapons is illegal in any conceivable situation. Governments must negotiate in good faith for, and bring about, nuclear disarmament in all its forms.

Despite the British government's claims that it is obeying the World Court's decision, and that the decision is compatible with government policy, the British government is continually flouting its obligations on nuclear disarmament. For instance, it consistently votes against disarmament resolutions at the United Nations.

Trident certainly could not be used, because even the threat of its use – let alone the use itself – could hardly avoid breaking humanitarian law.

COLIN MILLS  
Amersham Common

## Distorting Humanism

EVEN by its own standards the Up Front section of the February issue of *The Freethinker* excelled itself in distorting Humanism, the desire to see superstition removed from human affairs, into a campaign for socialism and abortion rights.

You have been kind enough to publish my letters concerning the former tendency in the past. As for the latter, it does not seem to have occurred to you that someone, irrespective of whether or not they hold religious views, might have the severest misgivings about an activity which, at least at some stage of a pregnancy, can only be considered as the deliberate killing of an unborn child.

I do not take an all-or-nothing view about this. It seems reasonable to hold that a newly-fertilised ovum cannot be considered "alive" in any meaningful sense; but neither yet that a nine-months-less-a-day foetus cannot be considered as anything less than a baby about to carry on his or her development in a new environment outside the mother. Until someone can design a test which can accurately ascertain whether or not a foetus has reached a stage whereupon it must be considered fully human – unlikely since we cannot even agree the terms of reference involved – then to permit abortion beyond the most immediate aftermath of fertilisation is at least a monumental act of presumption, and at worst murder.

What is more, it has nothing to do with Humanism either way.

NIGEL G MEEK  
Bromley

# You're telling us!

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## Misplaced

DANIEL H Bird's dismissal of the evidence of Tacitus and Josephus to the existence of Jesus (February) is as misplaced as his reliance on Count Volney, an ill-informed author very much out of date.

The latter's claim that Tacitus' testimony was taken from the depositions of Christians is absolutely unsupported. There is no evidence to this effect; it is much more likely that Tacitus recorded the official Roman view.

Nor is it true that the testimony of Josephus is "unanimously acknowledged to be apocryphal" and to have been an interpolation. Most modern scholars accept that, although the testimonies (there are in fact two) may have been altered, they are genuinely Josephan.

The fact that the Gospels were not written by Jesus himself is beside the point, as is the fact that some of them were not written by any of the disciples. They were written by people who appear to have had access to historical material. However there is evidence that Mark's Gospel records the words of Peter and that much of John is the work of the disciple of that name, who lived to a great age and died in Ephesus.

Surprisingly, Bird omits any mention of another Roman historian, Suetonius, who noted a Messianic fervour among the Jews in Rome on account of one "Chrestus" (an error for "Christus"). As a result of this tumult, the Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews in 49 CE.

STUART CAMPBELL  
Edinburgh

## A species chauvinist

HEATHER Evans' letter disparages speciesism or species chauvinism, while John Rayner attacks anthropocentric attitudes (both in the January issue). May I plead guilty to being an anthropocentric species-chauvinist? I would not risk the life of a human being to save a carrot, not even a field of carrots or a thousand ants. My view of the world is anthropocentric because I am a person and that is the only way I can see the world. To suggest otherwise would be dishonest.

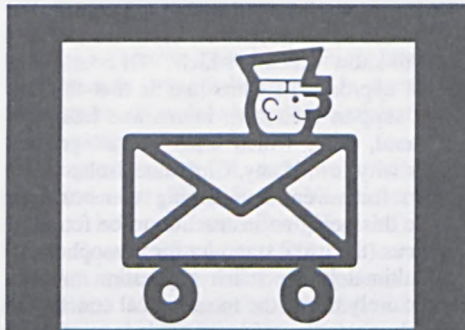
John Rayner asks us, as freethinkers, to apply our intellectual liberty to the environment. As freethinkers, of course there is no single god-given "right" answer and we will not necessarily agree. We must be careful of the doctrinal aspect of much of the Green movement which is in danger of becoming yet another religion. Sometimes this is explicit, such as the more extreme followers of "Gaia". Sometimes it is more subtle, as when environmentalists talk of what is "good for the Earth" (often with that ominous capital E). The earth has no ethics, no morality, no concept of "good" or "bad". Our view of what is good or bad for the earth can only be our anthropocentric judgement of what is good or bad for us.

Looking after the earth is obviously in our own interest, as is preserving endangered species and reducing pollution. However, we should never forget why we are trying to care

for it. Whether we like or not, we are all anthropocentric speciesists. What is variable is the degree of our anthropocentric attitudes and our balance of concern towards other species.

For example, as animals ourselves, most of us see animals as "higher" than plants and happily eat the latter. Most of us would not eat people, or at least not kill them to eat. Some of us will eat all other animals, some only fish. Almost all of us eat some animals and all of us eat plants. Few vegetarians concern themselves for the lives of the bacteria that create tofu. Only frutarians concern themselves with the lives of plants (eating only berries, seeds, etc., that fall from plants) but even they see must accept that they are reducing the opportunity for those seeds to produce new plants.

We are species chauvinist and should be proud of it. I applaud attempts to wipe out disease, even though I accept that most diseases



**Short and clearly-typed letters for publication may be sent to Peter Brearey, 24 Alder Avenue, Silcoates Park, Wakefield WF2 0TZ. Please include name and address (not necessarily for publication).**

are just other species of organism with as much "right" to live as me. Indeed the entire ecological balance of our world consists of the consumption of one species by another. The only question is how far it is sensible to distort that balance for our own benefit. Major distortions, such as intensive agriculture and high meat consumption, might appear to benefit us in the short run but risk destroying the world for our children. And it is the good of our children we must think of. Far from being selfish, that is a truly anthropocentric, I might even say *humanist*, approach.

CHRIS CONDON  
London W3

## Sexuality

I AM grateful to Mr Bailey for his letter (January), responding to mine in the December issue.

He claims – if I understand him correctly – that there is no choice in sexuality. I disagree that there is "no" choice in sexuality. There is choice in who one sleeps with; in what one does in bed; about the use of a condom; and, if one is in a relationship, whether to be faithful to one's partner. There are many choices.

Moreover, there is a simpler critique of the

Christian teachings on sexuality (which are against things other than homosexual practices, such as adultery) than Mr Bailey's; that is that homosexual practices are morally justified on the basis of the free choice of one's development, provided no harm is done to another against his will.

The argument is about moral choice, and comparison about race and nationality are fallacious. I pity Mr Bailey if he has no choice in the matter of his sexuality; I admire his courage for choosing to be who he wants to be, on the other hand.

The arguments about sexual development are complex, but I do not believe that any one theory on this matter, any more than one moral argument, has the right to special protection. Mrs Atkins is not "prejudiced" simply because she has a different view of the world than Mr Bailey. She is presumably a believing Christian, and from her point-of-view – irrespective of whether Mr Bailey considers it to be absurd – she is constrained to accept the Bible's condemnation of homosexual practices. Freethinkers hold another view, and are free to propagate it. Each has their own fora. I would not support a Christian who wished to close down a gay magazine any more than a homosexual who wanted to stop Christians on Christian programmes airing their views.

Between the two views – homosexual and Christian – there is no compromise; when so much is at stake, feelings will always run high. Calvin was if nothing not thorough when he explained from the Christian point-of-view in his commentary on Romans: "A man who feels shame may still be healed; but when such a lack of shame has been acquired through the practice of sin, that vice, and not virtue, pleases us and has our approval, there is no more any hope of amendment."

The homosexual denies he practices sin; the Christian proclaims that such practices are sinful. I can see no way in a free society but for each view to have its place, and for individuals to choose on the basis of conviction.

GEORGE JAMIESON  
Paisley

## Definitions

AN AGNOSTIC believes *neither* that there is a God *nor* that there is no God. The reason for his belief is the lack of evidence either that there is a God or that there is no God. I believe that an agnostic's strength of conviction can be as strong as a theist's or an atheist's because of this lack of evidence.

A "believer" believes that what he sees is evidence for what he believes. A theist, for example, sees a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis and believes it is evidence for the existence and glory of God. Or he hears a report on Rwanda and believes it is evidence that God moves in a mysterious way. Fox Mulder (a character in *The X-Files*) believes in extra-terrestrials and psychic forces. Like theists, he "wants to believe"; he just happens to believe in something different.

Dana Sculley (another character in *The X-Files*) represents an American skeptic. A "skeptical" (with a k) is someone who believes that

# You're telling us!

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there is no such thing as paranormal activity, UFOs and reincarnation. The skeptic looks for fraud or irrationalism because they have deduced from their belief that X (say) does not exist that therefore there must be fraud or irrationalism.

An agnostic approach or attitude combines both Mulder's open-mindedness and Sculley's being critical. It is really scientific scepticism by another name. The sceptic (with a c) investigates something because they are passionately interested in it (like Fox Mulder) and they also question and scrutinise the evidence (like Dana Sculley). The scientific sceptic aims to find something out which is new or to find a new way of looking at something old. In the process they rule out both self-delusion and fraud. The beauty and elegance of what they find is their answer to the charge of irrationalism.

**ERIC YAFFEY**  
Keighley

## Separatism

AS A teacher, I should like to express the hope that separatist Muslim schools will not be allowed under a UK Labour government. An analogy may be where there are separate Catholic and Protestant schools as in Northern Ireland: some authorities consider that this has contributed greatly to the sad state of that province since such separate schools may encourage racial and religious hatreds.

Furthermore, if separate Muslim schools are allowed, at the expense of the British taxpayer, then Muslim girls may have fewer civil liberties than are allowed to other British women. It may become even more difficult for them to avoid being used as marriage fodder for the various British Nationality Acts and they may be forced into marriage – in the UK, Pakistan or Bangladesh. Forced or persuasively coerced marriage is against Geneva and UNO conventions even for ethnic women, let alone those who may claim British citizenship.

Although the inflow of Muslim money into the Higher Education system of the UK may be noted – he who pays the piper calls the tune – surely a political party which believes in freedom should take account of the wishes of women and girls, even if these are poorly educated and can barely speak English, let alone write it. It is difficult to learn if one is kept from the State school and married off at 14 years.

Rest assured, this does happen in the UK. In the past 25 years in my classes in Secondary, Adult and Further education, there have been girls, born here or recently arrived here, who have been forced/persuasively coerced into arranged marriages. It is unwise for a teacher or social worker to interfere since senior men who control the race relations offices would regard any such intervention as racist. Probably that is why there is a standing committee in the House on such matters and why the right-wing Baroness Cox has a committee in the Lords which Muslim males attend in order to prioritise separate Muslim schools, at British taxpayers' expense, for Muslim women.

Those who are born into the Islamic faith, in the UK or elsewhere, are, according to my informants – students – bonded into this faith

and disallowed from changing to Christianity, atheism or some other faith, voluntarily chosen.

Obviously, if there is a large Muslim tied vote in a constituency, then freedom may disappear for public speech at least. This has already happened in Rochdale and in Oldham, where party workers tell constituents that nothing can be said on the matter of the Muslim vote and the freedom of women because of the possibility of being accused of racism.

I should like to express the hope that there will be no separate Muslim schools for women and that a certain measure of freedom will be allowed in spite of the *sharia* in the UK.

**BRENDA ABLE**  
Croydon

## Politicians

IT ISN'T easy to be serious about John Major, except when one looks around at the havoc he has wrought in this country. It is impossible to be serious when it comes to his religious beliefs. He prays "in all circumstances", according to *Belief in Politics* (Hodder and Stoughton).

This reminds me of the series of cartoons in *Private Eye* last year, depicting Mr Major in the most ridiculous situations and used as a utensil for all kinds of risible purposes. I suggest that they might now be repeated with the subject's eyes closed and his hands clasped in prayer.

"I do believe", he says. "I don't pretend to understand all of the complex parts of Christian theology but I simply accept it". Which isn't at all unusual: acceptance without understanding is a common feature of religious belief, but the Prime Minister could take refuge in that qualification. Perhaps it's only "all the complex parts of Christian theology" that are beyond him, and that the simpler parts of it justify his faith. Back to basics, as it were.

We all know that Tony Blair is a Christian (I was going to add the word Socialist, but that would be sacrilege), and Paddy Ashdown isn't going to be left out when it comes to piety. He, too, counts himself a Christian, although he gets "uncomfortable" if somebody asks him whether he is a Protestant or a Roman Catholic. He's not that kind of Christian, he tells us. He prays every night and believes in a Christian God, but "it's an encompassing God that recognises and understands". Which is OK as far as it goes, but is that far enough? The purpose of prayer is not only to be understood by the deity, but also to get an answer.

Still, we get the picture, and every time I think of Mr Ashdown in future (not likely to be often from past experience, I admit) I'll be tempted to see him kneeling by the bed in his nightshirt, eyes and hands lifted to heaven.

John Redwood, whose study of *Reason, Ridicule and Religion in the Age of Enlightenment* (Thames and Hudson) might possibly have led him to doubt, says he has "Christian thoughts". He believes in God and in "the message of the New Testament", whatever that may be (the Second Coming? the Apocalypse?).

"There is the power of prayer", Mr Redwood asserts, "and the recognition in your daily life of Christian obligations". Like "sell all, and give to the poor"?

Paul Boateng, Labour's legal affairs spokesman, looks to the Gospels to "provide a bedrock of faith and values", but the most striking metaphor comes from Social Security Secretary Peter Lilley, who likens Christianity to "a pair of spectacles" which "enables you to see more clearly".

And with the price of glasses what it is today, at least you can say, faith is cheaper.

**COLIN McCALL**  
Hertfordshire

## Chip away!

I HAVE spent 30 years writing to Christians in all walks of life and many different organisations and have yet to get any reply worth printing in *The Freethinker* (Karl Heath, Page 15, February).

As a recent survey showed, the people who are supposed to teach Christianity are almost totally ignorant of it themselves – except the sanitised bits they are taught to use.

There is no easy solution. It's an on-going process which is slowly but surely emptying churches etc. It is the job of all Freethinkers to keep chipping away at these silly superstitions, to expose them for what they are.

As the Whitehouse mob found out, a vocal minority can make a difference – so keep on writing, keep on complaining. Don't let them get away with any lies.

And don't forget your MP. These are the people who make the rules, and most are Christians. They are the reason why Christianity still has any influence in the UK.

**MICHAEL HILL**  
Crystal Palace

## THE POTTS PAPERS

Terry Sanderson's wicked satire on religion, tabloid journalism and family values

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*The Potts Papers* is £6.95, available to order from good bookshops or post free from The Other Way Press, PO Box 130, London W5 1DQ.

# What's On...What's On...What's On...

**Birmingham Humanist Group:** Information: Tova Jones on 0121 4544692.

**Blackpool & Fylde Humanist Group:** Information: D Baxter on 01253 726112.

**Brighton and Hove Humanist Group:** 40 Cowper Street, Hove (near Hove Station, bus routes 2a, 5 and 49). Sunday, March 2, 5.30 pm for 6 pm: Bill McIlroy: *Brighton for Freethinkers*.

**Bristol Humanists:** Information: Margaret Dearnaley on 0117 9502960 or Hugh Thomas on 0117 9871751.

**Bromley Humanists:** Information: D Elvin 0181 777 1680.

**Central London Humanists:** Information: Cherie Holt on 0171 916 3015 or Hilary Leighter on 01895 632096.

**Chiltern Humanists:** Information: 01296 623730. Friends Meeting House, Berkhamsted (near The Lamb pub), Tuesday, April 8, 7.45 pm: Ralph Ison and Alan Marshall: *Ritual Practices*. Tuesday, May 13, 7.45 pm, Wendover Library, Jane Wynne Wilson: *International Humanism*. NB: AGM at Wendover Library on Tuesday, March 11.

**Cornwall Humanists:** Information: B Mercer, "Amber," Short Cross Road, Mount Hawke, Truro TR4 8EA. Telephone: 01209 890690.

**Cotswold Humanists:** Information: Philip Howell, 2 Cleavelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ: 01242 528743.

**Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists:** Information: 01926 858450. Waverley Day Centre, 65 Waverley Road, Kenilworth: Thursday, March 20, 7.30 pm: Daniel O'Hara: *David Hume*.

**Derbyshire:** Kevin W Stone, of 22A Church Street, Ashbourne, would like to hear from readers of *The Freethinker* in his area, with a view to forming a group.

**Devon Humanists:** Information: Christine Lavery, 5 Prospect Garden, off Blackboy Road, Exeter (01392 56600).

**Ealing Humanists:** Information: Derek Hill 0181 422 4956 or Charles Rudd 0181 904 6599.

**Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA):** Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HD; 01926 858450. Monthly meetings (second Friday, 7.30 pm) at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1 (Library, 1st floor). March 14: Peter Sweasey speaks on his new book *From Queer to Eternity*. New Gay & Lesbian Humanist now out: A4 stamped, addressed envelope to George Broadhead, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HD for trial copy.

**Hampstead Humanist Society:** Information: N I Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP.

**Havering & District Humanist Society:** Information: J Condon 01708 473597 or J Baker 01708 458925. Meetings held at Hopwa House, Inskip Drive, Hornchurch, from 8 pm to 10 pm. Tuesday, March 4: Dr James Hemming: *The Origin of Moral Values*.

**Humanist Society of Scotland:** Secretary: George Rodger, 17 Howburn Place, Aberdeen AB1 2XT (telephone: 01224 573034). Convener: Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire; telephone: 01563 526710.

**Glasgow Group:** Information: Alan Henness, 138 Lumley Street, Grangemouth FK3 8BL. Telephone: 01324 485152.

**Edinburgh Group:** Information: 2 Saville Terrace, Edinburgh EH9 3AD; 0131 667 8389.

**Kent Humanists:** Information: M Rogers, 2 Lyndhurst Road, Broadstairs CT10 1DD; 01843 864506.

**Leeds & District Humanist Group:** Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. All meetings at 7.30 pm, Swarthmore Centre, Leeds. Tuesday, March 11: John Bradfield: *Green Funerals*. Tuesday, April 8 (at 14 Foxholes Crescent, Calverley): AGM and Social. Tuesday, May 13 (at Swarthmore Centre): Senior Probation Officer Rosemary Heal: *Crime and Punishment*.

**Leicester Secular Society:** Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB; 0116 2622250 or 0116 241 4060. Meetings on Sundays at 6.30 pm. March 9: Pauline Munroe: *What is Domestic Violence?* March 16: 116th Anniversary Lecture (see display advertisement). March 23: Lyn Hurst: *Revolution and Counter-revolution in Spain, May 1937*.

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Information: Denis Cobell, 99 Ravensbourne Park, London SE6 4YA; 0181 6904645. Meetings at Unitarian Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford, 8 pm. Thursday, March 27: Diana Elvin: *Coping with Life*.

**Manchester Humanist Group:** Information: Arthur Chappell on 0161 681 7607. Meetings at Friends' Meeting House on Mount Street, Manchester, on the second Wednesday of each month at 7.30 pm. March 12: John Passmore: *The Freemasons*; April 9: *Can Humanists be Spiritual?*

**Norwich Humanist Group:** Information: Vincent G Chainey, Le Chene, 4 Mill Street, Bradenham, Thetford IP25 7PN; 01362 820982. Meetings at Martineau Hall, 21a Colegate, Norwich, 7.30 pm. March 20: Robert Ashby: *Something Humanistic*. April 17: Tevor Claxton: *Spiritualism*.

**Preston and District Humanist Group:** Information: Peter Howells on 01257 265276.

**Sheffield Humanist Society:** The Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street (adjoining Bank Street), Sheffield. Wednesday, March 5, 8pm: Dan Bye: *Pagan Origins of Christian Festivals*. Wednesday, April 2, 8 pm: Peter Brearey, Editor of *The Freethinker*. *The Freethinker - Past, Present and Future*. Information: Gordon Sinclair, 9 South View Road, Hoyland, Barnsley S74 9EB (01226 743070) or Bill McIlroy, 117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield S6 3NT (0114 2685731).

**South Place Ethical Society:** Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1 (telephone 0171 831 7723). Full list of lectures and Sunday concerts (6.30pm) from the above address. Telephone: 0171 831 7723.

**Somerset:** Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in Yeovil from Wendy Sturgess on 01458-274456.

**Stockport Secular Group:** Information: Carl Pinel, 85 Hall Street, Offerton, Stockport SK1 4DE; 0161 480 0732.

**Sutton Humanist Group:** Information: 0181 642 4577.

**Teesside Humanist Group:** Information: J Cole 01642 559418 or R Wood 01740 650861.

**Tyneside Humanist Group:** Third Thursday of each month (except August), 6.45pm, Literary and Philosophical Society building, Westgate Road, Newcastle.

**Ulster Humanist Association:** Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Meetings second Thursday of the month, Regency Hotel, Botanic Avenue, Belfast BT7.

**West Glamorgan Humanist Group:** Information: 01792 206108 or 01792 296375, or write Julie Norris, 3 Maple Grove, Uplands, Swansea SA2 0JY.

**Worthing Humanist Group:** Information: Mike Sargent, on 01903 239823 or Frank Pidgeon on 01903 263867.

**Secretaries:** Please make a contribution to The Freethinker Fund if you feel that inclusion in this feature is helpful.

## LEICESTER SECULAR SOCIETY Secular Hall Humberstone Gate Leicester LE1 1WB

The 116th Anniversary Lecture will be delivered at 6.30 pm on Sunday March 16 by KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD (General Secretary of the National Secular Society) on the theme of

**SECULARISM TODAY**